

Water 'truce' may be fragile

■ Complicated agreement could hit snags when apportioning begins.

By Russell Clemings
and Mark Grossi
The Fresno Bee

On Thursday, when he announced a landmark water-quality agreement for the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, Gov. Wilson declared, "peace has broken out amid the California water wars."

But in the very next breath, he admitted that this truce, like many others, may prove hard to keep.

The agreement announced by Wilson and a gaggle of state and federal environmental regulators melds farm and urban water district leaders into an unprecedented consensus with environmentalists and government officials.

It sets clear standards for salt levels in the delta, the liquid heart of the state's far-flung plumbing system.

It places carefully worded limits on how much water can be pumped from the delta and sent south to quench thirsty San Joaquin Valley farms and Southern California suburbs.

It even shows, observers say, that the 800-pound gorilla of California water politics, the Los Angeles based Metropolitan Water District, is working to patch its frayed alliance with the Valley's agricultural water districts.

But it may all break down when, over the next few months, the state Water

Resources Control Board decides how to divide the pain, apportioning water pumping cuts among an estimated 7,000 users throughout the watershed.

"We don't pretend that this is the final answer for California water policy," the governor acknowledged. "There will be some major sledding ahead."

The agreement itself is a numbingly complex web of pumping limits — stated as percentages of delta water inflows, and varying monthly to protect rare fish — and limits on salinity, which can affect breeding conditions for many sensitive fish.

How complex? Here's some of what it says about salinity monitoring: "The Chipps Island requirement in February will be zero days when the Eight River Index in January is less than 0.8 million acre-feet and 28 days when it is greater than 1.0 million acre-feet with linear interpolation between 0.8 and 1.0 million acre-feet."

But boiled to its essence, the agreement will require farmers and city dwellers alike to relinquish precious water, especially during drought years.

Pumping will be reduced

The three federal agencies that were at the bargaining table said they estimate that total pumping from the delta — which averaged 5.8 million acre-feet in a normal year and 4.8 million in a dry year under existing standards — would have to be reduced by 400,000 acre-feet in normal years and 1.1 million acre-feet in drought years to meet the new standards.

One acre-foot is the amount of water a typical Fresno single-family home consumes in 18 months; Valley farmers use two to four acre-feet to grow an acre of cotton.

Valley farm interests, who have suffered through four consecutive years of short water supplies due to drought and environmental needs, say the new standards will help reverse that, although full supplies may never return.

"I don't think you'll ever see it go back to the way it was in the 1980s," said San Luis and Delta-Mendota Water Authority executive director Dan Nelson, who represented agriculture in the negotiations. "But with normal rainfall this year, I'm hoping we'll get over 50 percent deliveries."

Costs unknown

The economic impact of the new standards remains unknown. When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed a tougher set of delta standards last year, the government estimated their impact would be \$45 million per year.

This time, nobody is willing to guess at the costs.

"We haven't had time to analyze it to see exactly what it means," said economist Duane Paul of Northwest Economic Associates, a firm that Valley irrigation districts hired to study impacts from past droughts.

On the other side of the ledger, environmentalists and regulators say the new standards will give at least a modest boost to delta-dependent fish like the threatened delta smelt, the endangered winter run of Sacramento River Chinook salmon, and the Sacramento splittail, which is being considered for endangered species protection.

"The protections are in the low end, but we're swallowing pretty hard and have taken a risk just like everyone else," said David Fullerton, an environmentalist representing the Natural Heritage Institute.

Environmental forces also ex-

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Delta: Accord requires that all water users sacrifici

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tracted \$30 million from water users for a three-year attack on other causes of declining fish populations — including unscreened pump inlets and other diversions that draw young fish to their deaths.

In a key concession that cemented Thursday's deal, the first year's \$10 million pledge will be fronted by the Metropolitan Water District.

Observers say the district played a key role in moving the negotiations toward a conclusion — and in the process, appeared to be trying to mend fences that it had broken in recent years with Valley agricultural interests.

"It's a whole new world in terms of our ability to work with Met," said Jason Peltier, manager of a major farm water group, the Central Valley Project Water Association.

Peltier and other farm water leaders say the Metropolitan Water District's support in 1992 of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act — a federal law that shifts some project water to fish and wildlife — strained the longstanding alliance of Met and the Valley districts, an alliance that got the State Water Project built in the 1960s.

Adding to the friction were Met's well-publicized efforts to buy surplus water from Valley farmers.

Major blunder

The district proposed, for example, to pay \$175 an acre-foot for as much as 35,000 acre-feet of water a year from one farmer, former Assemblyman Rusty Areias, who owns a Los Banos-area dairy farm.

The head of the Valley's largest irrigation district said he believes Met officials were surprised by the strong negative reaction to those two actions.

"They realized down there that they made a major blunder

when they parted with agriculture over the CVP bill," Westlands Water District general manager Jerald Butchert said. "I'm not sure they knew what they were doing."

But in recent months, Met led an effort by the state's urban water agencies to reach a consensus with the farm water districts on delta standards.

The current standards were adopted in 1978 and rejected by a state court judge in 1984, but had remained in effect as state and federal officials tried again and again, without success, to win support for new ones.

Throughout the early 1990s, as endangered species problems forced the issue, farm and urban water districts were unable to find common ground.

That began to change this year, after the EPA settled a lawsuit filed by environmentalists and pledged, in the settlement, to issue new delta standards by Dec. 15.

Common interests

Faced with that threat, water users worked out a joint plan that would leave them with more water than the EPA's tentative plan. The joint plan, finished last month, formed the basis for the agreement announced Thursday.

"What has happened in the last year is that we decided we have a commonality of interests," which included finding a solution for the delta standards deadlock, Met General Manager John Wodraska said Thursday.

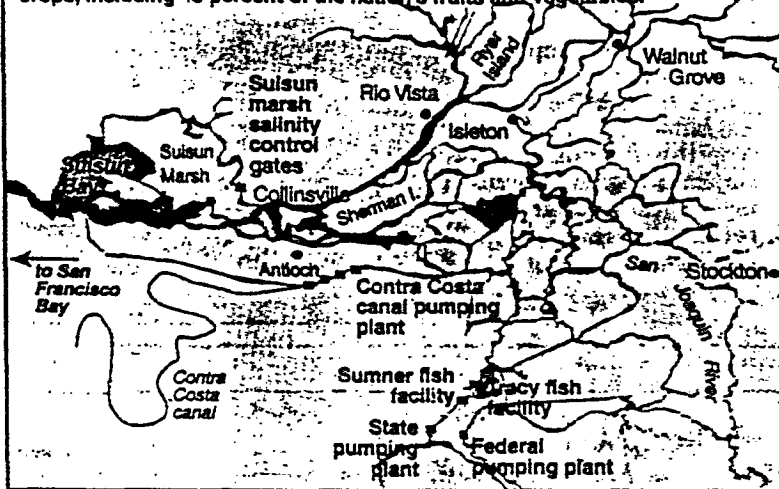
"What drives the urbans is dependability of the water supply and what drives ag is the price," added Steve Macaulay, general manager of the State Water Contractors, another users group. "They realized neither one will win if they don't come together."

Staff writer Pamela Podger contributed to this story.

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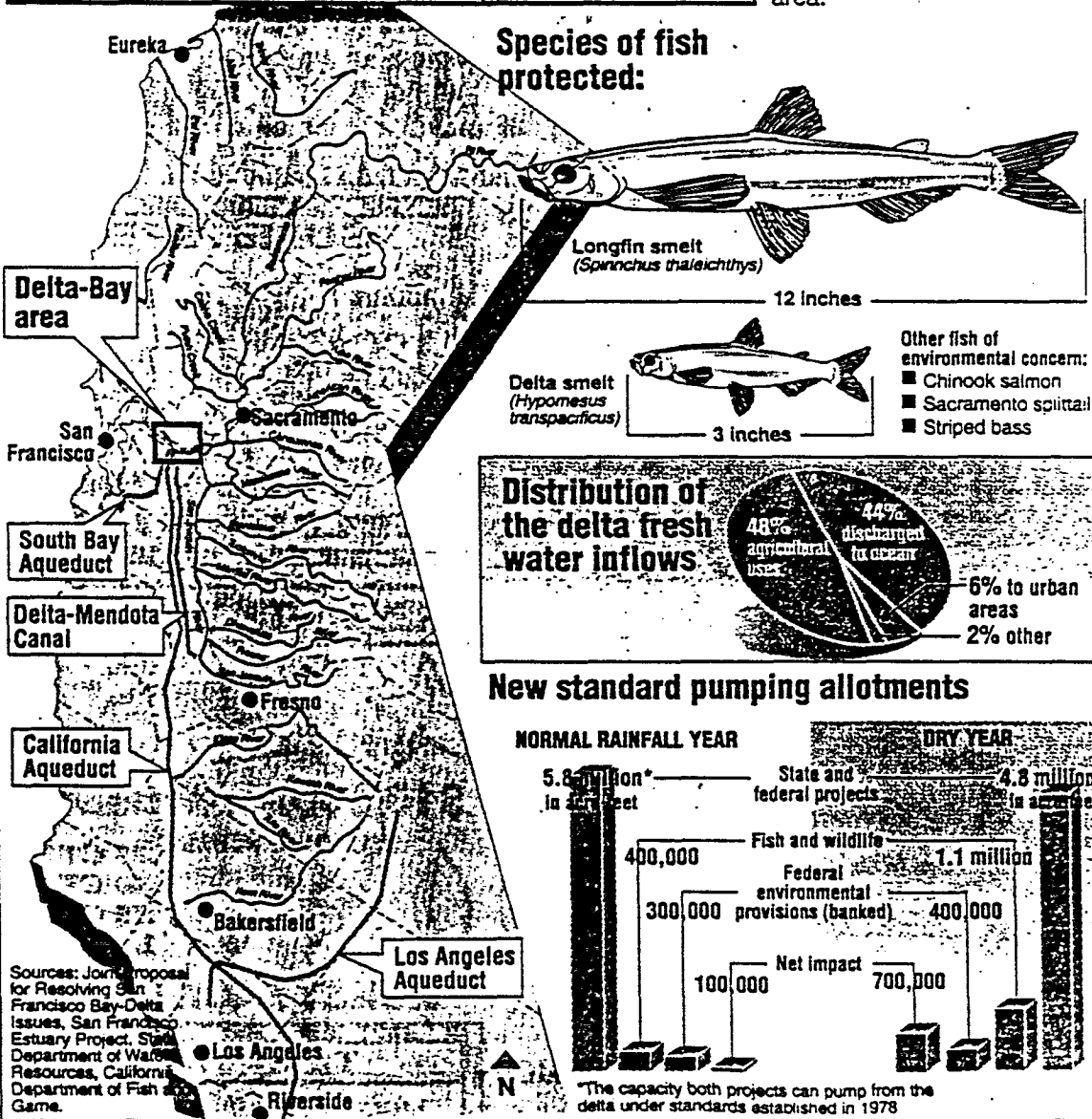
Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta

The Bay-Delta receives 47 percent of the state's runoff. It provides drinking water to more than 20 million people, mainly in the San Francisco Bay area and Southern California. It also provides irrigation water for more than 200 crops, including 45 percent of the nation's fruits and vegetables.



The state redefines its water policy

The new standard called "X2" means 2,000 parts per million salinity at measuring points. Sea water is about 32,000 parts per million. River water is less than 1,000 parts per million. The purpose of the standard is to protect fish that breed and hatch in areas where fresh and salt water mix, such as in the Delta-Bay area.



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